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ABSTRACT

Public discussion of American education centers on crisis and decline. In response to these sentiments, citizens are fast abandoning all forms of local control over schools. Schools are controlled by increasingly distant experts. Some people think that this new direction is necessary because the schools have failed academically. On the contrary, schools have failed because they have already become too distant, unfamiliar, and unfamilial. The growth of home-schooling is due not to rigid ideologies or parental fears of academic failure, but rather to an increasing crisis of human relationships, a lack of trust among fellow citizens, and a lack of a sense of shared belonging to a common public culture. In large, distant schools, parents feel unwelcome, teachers have no time or opportunity to know their students, and students become alienated. When schools are organized sensibly, as communities, children respond by showing their best qualities. Democracy rests on relationships, and people must have early experiences of community if they are to learn and understand the workings of democracy. (SV)

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There's a lot of crisis and decline talk when it comes to American education. Politicians and the media outdo each other to see who can make the direst claims. (That the USA ranks tops in literacy on international assessments is literally a buried news story.) We're fast abandoning all forms of local control over our school, and entering into a wholly new scenario in which schools are controlled by increasingly distant experts in a response to this incessant emergency talk.

We're told that this new direction is necessary because the schools have failed us. And we cannot survive the failure.

And indeed, I'm in agreement with that. Although for entirely different reasons. In fact, what we're fast abandoning are the remnants of what most needs to be saved.

I believe our schools have failed us because they have already become too distant, too unfamiliar and unfamilial. They have, in fact, done a remarkably good job of teaching the '3Rs', and a bunch of other academic stuff. And the test scores confirm rather than disconfirm this.

The growth of home-schooling is not due to the rigid ideologues of the far right, nor the result of parents afraid that their children will fail to make the grade on the latest academic assessment tools.

Nor are charter schools, and the movement for vouchers the result of declining test scores—which in fact are not declining, although they are made more credible by such claims.

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They are due to an increasing crisis of human relationships, of trust between fellow citizens, of lack of a sense of shared belonging to a common public culture. Schools are not as physically dangerous as the media portray, but they are dangerous to the spirit—especially the needed spirit of trustfulness.

And our schools are responding to the distrust by offering more of what's sick about our culture, rather than suggesting that they can indeed be an antidote to what's rotten.

Yes. It's a fact. There's something new in the land. Fewer citizens —not merely 18-year-olds but 21- and 25-year-olds—vote today than they did in my youth. That's a crisis. It's harder and harder to keep volunteer libraries and fire departments going. That's a crisis. Kids spend more and more of their time in the hands of people who barely know them. That's a crisis.

And it will get worse, not better, unless we all— rural folk, city folk, white Americans, Black Americans, rich and poor, join forces to stop it. All of us must join together because what has caused the crisis affects us all and what it would mean to lose, will injure us equally. And when we lose our local communities and the relationships that bind them together, it still won't make the kids in the end get higher scores!

Lots of things have come together to cause our current problems. People no longer expect to raise their children near grandparents and aunts and uncles who can keep an eye on them. People do not expect their jobs to last a lifetime; nor their marriages. Nor their friends. They see the institutions around them as impersonal and impermanent. These present a clear and present danger to us all.

We are wealthier—or at least most of us are—in material resources, but more nervous about our human resources.

Some of these changes are hard to do much about, or at least hard for us to see how we can affect them. But some of them are easily within our control. And one of those that's still within our reach is our schools.

Our schools are a conscious invention and intervention by local communities into the rearing of the next generation of its fellow citizens. That's not only their history, but their constitutional basis. They are a way to have a say into the values and social and intellectual skills and habits of the adults of tomorrow.

Their importance is greater than ever before, and yet we have less and less of a sense of control over them. "For our own good" we are being promised a future in which they are out of our reach entirely.

Parents, if they can afford it, will have a voice in the education of their own individual child if vouchers become the norm. But even then such schools may be monitored and regulated to a degree that no public school has ever been before. And vouchers give the

citizens of our country no part to play, except insofar as they believe that electing someone to Congress is a way to shape the school right down the block! No wonder voting seems less and less appealing. It's too much like a magical incantation.

We are about to turn over the what and how of educating the young to a combination of state and national experts, politicians, and test makers—even as less than half our fellow citizens trust or understand the workings of our society enough to vote, much less to the experts who are poised to redesign the schools of the future.

If the schools have failed us, it's because they got too big, too far away from the "us" who knew the kids best, and too standardized and uniform to respond to the particulars of each child and each community.

Schools are the one institution that could construct for the young what it means to be a member of a real community, made up of adults of various ages alongside youngsters of various ages. Such schools offer a way of learning together in the most efficient and productive way the species knows how, through the company we keep, by people we trust and want to emulate. That's what schooling has traditionally meant.

When I was a child there were 200,000 school boards—over a million citizens—one in 100, saw themselves as governors of their schools. Most people, in short, knew somebody who knew somebody who ran our schools. Furthermore a majority of citizens had school-age kids. And the schools they went to rarely were larger than a few hundred, and often only a few dozen pupils constituted a school. The school was a familiar place.

Today there are less than 20,000 school boards—and twice as many citizens. Maybe one in 20,000 citizens serves on a school board. And the schools they oversee house well over a thousand students, and are often located far from their own hometowns. And most Americans no longer have school-age children at all.

It's easy to see how such already distanced and alienated schools could become the focus of distrust: suspect as the nurturers of our young; not public but 'government' owned. Who knows anymore what is really going on, except as the media portray it? Who knows what to make of claims of disaster, criminality, ignorance and worse going on in the classrooms of America? Who and what to check it out against? Cynicism comes easily.

And even parents find negotiating schools harder and harder. They are made to feel more and more extraneous. Nuisances. Even if they are well-educated and well-spoken, they feel as strangers.
By the time kids reach high school they have often attended several different schools, most divided into discrete age-groups (Preschools, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12) with many different and changing principals and superintendents. By the time they get to high school their beloved child is, at best, a number in a great sea of children. Who does the parent call when in doubt? Who knows their child well enough to join in their worries? Who can offer to keep in touch? Who could intervene on his or her behalf?

No one.

Not because teachers are less caring. But because for over 40 years we've been making it harder and harder for teachers to know their students—or their colleagues—well. They work in isolation, and in increasingly prescribed circumstances. They run faster just to stand still. If the faculty meet to put their wise heads together, the gathering is one of hundreds. What kind of deliberation does this mean for a bunch of busy professionals. Who listens? Who's paying attention. Who's watching the clock to see how soon the meeting will end.

And so too their students. They're also just waiting for the bell to ring, to return to the communities—of peers—that really matter.

There is less and less room for individual pacing, interests, and styles. And it is harder and harder for anyone to say, "Stop, this doesn't make sense." Because no one is in charge. And no one has the time.
But kids are hungry for genuine communities, as the nerds and jocks remind us. They like being part of clubs that include older and younger kids and adults of all ages—especially adults who are genuinely knowledgeable, skillful and above all—powerful.

And if and when we organize schools sensibly, it turns out kids are much like we nostalgically remember them as being! Often naughty, occasionally rebellious, and even occasionally outrageous—but mostly loyal, loving, enthusiastic, curious and desirous of becoming more powerful, more competent and better able to care for themselves and those they love, including even the world itself. They recapture such qualities fast, as though they are just waiting in the wings for us to offer them a serious sanctuary for their humanity, their intelligence, their caring.

What the Central Park East schools in New York and now Mission Hill in Boston remind me is that it's still possible to reverse a bad idea—to go back to what counts.

It's time to remind the true conservatives that the American genius was always connected to our respect for practical know-how, ordinary close-to-the-earth common sense, local control, a little skepticism about expertise and Ph.D.s, and a lot of willingness to trust each other.

These are the qualities we dare not abandon in the raising of our children. Not only out of love for our children, but out of love for our country and—in all sincerity— for the republic for which it stands.

Democracy is not just a set of juridical relationships. It rests on relationships—on the possibility of understanding each other, of walking in each other's shoes, of imagining that we can trust each other—warily, skeptically—but not cynically.

And we cannot learn these things if we haven't experienced them—not just in the bosom of our family, but also in the bosom of our communities—those varied associations that we join in the course of life. We can no more learn what it means to rely on each other, to be responsive and responsible to each other in the absence of having experienced it than we can learn to speak a language we have never heard spoken.

If we allow our children—not just our own biological ones but our nation's children —to be raised by institutions over which no thoughtful grown-ups are in charge, we are abandoning our democratic institutions as well.

So it's not a small fight, it's not an easy struggle, but it's an essential one. And it's not a whit different, except in detail, in the middle of East Harlem or Roxbury than in the rural communities that you come from.

As we continue this dialogue over the coming days, I suspect it will be hard to tell at times whether we are urban or rural, liberal or conservative, rich or poor. Especially if we can lay claim to a different kind of language to express our concerns, rather than the latest technocratic jargon. Our children are not "products," their work is not an "outcome," their purpose is not to be "tools" in a larger global competition. How they grow up is a matter as much of habits of the heart as habits of the mind—neither of which are much in evidence in the schools of today or the ones the well-intended fixers have in mind for tomorrow.

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Deborah W. Meier, Keynote Speaker, Biographical Background

Deborah W. Meier has spent more than three decades working in public education as a teacher, writer and public advocate. She began her teaching career as a kindergarten and Headstart teacher in Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City schools. She was the founder and teacher-director of a network of highly successful public elementary schools in East Harlem and the founder-principal of Central Park East Secondary School, a New York City public high school. More than 90 percent of its entering students graduate and go on to college, mostly to four-year schools.

The schools she has helped create serve predominantly low-income African-American and Latino students, and include a typical range of New York City students in terms of academic skills and special needs. There are no entrance requirements. These schools are considered among the best in New York City and exemplars of reform nationally.

Ms. Meier was also the founder of the Center for Collaborative Education, a network of more than 40 like-minded New York City public schools that work together to support school reform. The Center is the New York City affiliate of the national Coalition of Essential schools led by Ted Sizer at Brown University. She is also currently the Coalition's vice-chair. Between 1992 and 1996, she also served a co-director for a project to redesign and implement reform of two large failing city high schools; as an advisor to New York City's Annenberg Challenge and principal and founder of the Mission Hill School. Mission Hill is a new elementary school in Boston's Roxbury community, a pilot school that will eventually serve children from kindergarten through 8th grade. She is also a board member of Boston's Center for Collaborative Education.

A learning theorist, she encourages new approaches that will enhance democracy and equity in public education. Ms. Meier writes and speaks extensively on educational issues and is on the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine, *The Nation* and the Harvard Education Letter. She is a board member of the Educational Alliance, the Association of Union Democracy, and Educators for Social Responsibility; a founding member of the national Board of Professional Teaching Standards and the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, and a member of the National Academy of Education, among others.

Meier was born April 6, 1931, in New York City. She attended Antioch College from 1949 to 1951 and received an M.A. in history from the University of Chicago in 1955. She has received honorary degrees from Brown, Bard, Clark, Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Hebrew Union College, Hofstra, the New School, Teachers College of Columbia University and Bank Street College of Education. She was recipient of the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship Award in 1987.

Her 1995 book *The Power of Their Ideas, Lessons to America from a Small School in Harlem*, was published by Beacon Press, and is now available in paperback.